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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 1389
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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1370
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 1313
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1386
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0970
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1437
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1472
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS 0763
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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S NATIONAL PARKS SEEK U.S. COOPERATION

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¶1. SUMMARY: Central Asian Regional Environment, Science, Technology and Health Officer (REO), and Environmental Specialist and Embassy PolOff, visited the Tigrovaya Balka National Reserve February 8. Officials from State Committee on Environmental Protection (SCEP) accompanied EmbOffs. The government has made some efforts to improve the park system and recognizes tourism as an alternative means to diversify the economy, however the government lacks the money and specialized skills needed to upgrade the parks. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Tajikistan's 17 natural reserves and parks are good prospects for eco-tourism or extreme-tourism, and could potentially generate significant public and private income. Already Marco Polo sheep, the Pamir Mountains, and Tajikistan's pristine environment, untrampled by Western tourists, draw some 100 hunters, hikers, and adventurous backpackers who are willing to pay thousands of dollars to travel to Tajikistan. SCEP officials are interested in working with the United States government, especially the United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service (USDAFS), and have begun discussions to improve park management. Tajikistan is also reaching out to its neighbors, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan to establish a Peace Park in the Pamirs.

¶3. Tigrovaya Balka National Reserve is located in southern Tajikistan and borders Aghanistan. During the Tajik civil war, Russian and Tajik Government forces were stationed in the reserve and refugees from Tajikistan and Afghanistan often transited through and hunted in the park, destroying its resources. Tajik Border Guards now patrol the reserve's southern border, and SCEP officials assured EmbOffs that drug smugglers and terrorists no longer transit the reserve.

Approximately 30 park employees supervise the nearly 50,000-hectare reserve.

¶4. The SCEP recognized that money will help rebuild the park system, but they also realize that they need assistance from tourism, ecology, and park specialists. SCEP officials explained that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, like other fields, specialists left the country, and Tajikistan's current education system no longer can supply the scientific and technical specialists needed to manage the parks. The SCEP realizes new laws need to be added to promote eco-tourism and proper park management and is working with the Parliament on a draft law revising Soviet-era environmental protection laws.

¶5. One of the problems afflicting the Tigrovaya Balka Nature Reserve, as well as most of Central Asia is salinization. A white layer of salt coats a large part of the reserve. Salinization is a common problem throughout Tajikistan and must be carefully managed to protect native salt-tolerant species. Agricultural practices in most of Central Asia result in the kind of salt layers seen in Tigrovaya Balka.

¶6. Most of Tigrovaya Balka's facilities were destroyed during the civil war, and since then, the government has been able to do little financially to help the park. However, SCEP officials assured EmbOffs that the government is beginning to fund environmental projects and has earmarked 600,000 somoni (approximately \$187,000) over four years for improvements in the park system. In addition, international donors are also assisting in some park improvements. Last year, the park received enough government financing to build a museum at its entrance and renovate some rest areas and buildings throughout the reserve.

¶7. COMMENT: SCEP officials seemed progressive and understand the need to modernize laws in order to improve the system. However, in many ways, they are still rooted in the Soviet-era

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approach to park and land management. Tajikistan's nature parks and tourism industry would benefit greatly from cooperation with the U.S. National Park Service, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and other U.S. government agencies active in park and forest management, environmental protection, and tourism. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND